

*The Word as a Whole*¹
Genesis 1.4, 31 and John 20.19-23
Russ Dean, March 30, 2008

I had a fascinating conversation this week by email. Amy's youngest niece, who is a third-grade school teacher in Clinton, SC wrote me concerning last week's newsletter article. I had written in defense of the use of words – even some of the words which I use in sermons and articles, which may not be part of your vernacular. (Should I say that that means the language you use every day!) Katie, who is a teacher and something of an aspiring writer herself, obviously took exception to my article. Though she was kind enough to say she “didn't disagree with everything,” she wanted to write in defense of the “common folk.” And she closed with this:

Many, many, years ago Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*. He basically said (basically being the key word there), "Hey, you English Colonist (sic) you need to separate yourselves from England." The elitist to the poorest read Thomas Paine's pamphlet... I explain to my students Thomas Paine's importance to History – how his "common sense" and his use of common words, that ALL could understand, led to the establishment of a new country.

So, Russ, I ask you what formed America . . . big words or small ones?

(Ouch!) I love Katie's honesty, and it has sparked an enjoyable dialogue, of mutual affirmation and respect, in which she and I have spilled the ink of several thousands of words, both big and small. I told Katie that I understood her point, and appreciated it. The common folk are the backbone of this, and every, country. They always have been. They always will be. But the simple answer to her simple question is simple indeed. It was the so-called “big words” which founded this country. Not the

¹ The cover of the bulletin for this service included this quotation, the origin of the sermon title, which came to me across the internet: “Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tinhg is taht frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pelae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can siltl raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by istlef but the wrod as a wlohe.”

words of commoners, but of intellectuals and visionaries and academics and rebels of uncommon knowledge that founded the great experiment called Democracy. It was not common words which first spoke against the institution of slavery, or in defense of a woman's right to vote. Nor was it common words which first told us that the earth actually revolved around the sun, or that we might need to learn to say the word "evolution" in church. All of the great movements of history have words – uncommon words – to thank for their accomplishment.

I quickly found Mr. Paine's pamphlet on the internet and "breezed through" those words that were read and easily understood by "the elitist to the poorest."

Perhaps (he says) the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence (sic) of custom. But tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.

If these were common folk, they were un-folksily common!

I finished my defense with Katie in this way. I said: "I believe in electricity, because I know that it works. But about all I can say about it is that when you turn the switch on, the juice flows to the light bulb and, (like magic) I've got light. And this works, for me (when everything's working). But electricity is not magic and has nothing to do with 'juice' (of any flavor) whatsoever – and someone needs to know the real language of watts and volts and joules (and ohms) and resistance, etc... so that when there's an "electrical tragedy" (i.e., when my power goes out!), someone rather than 'turn-the-switch-on-guy' can fix it."

Electricity works in the vernacular. Turn the juice on – and "*let there be light*" (Genesis 1). But it doesn't really work that way at all. Nor does the science or technology

or medicine which has so greatly improved our common lives. And neither should we expect common words to suffice for politics or theology or our life in general. Someone has to know how to speak these languages. If we are to survive, someone must continue to know how to speak The Word as a Whole.

I believe that one of the gravest threats to American Democracy today, indeed to the American experiment in total, is the demise of education. Case in point is our inability to speak and write and listen and tolerate any world-view that cannot be expressed on a bumper sticker. Though our academies still attract the brightest students from around the world, one must wonder how long this will be so, for report after report show American students falling behind their European and Asian counterparts in academic comparisons. If Katie is right², that every butcher, baker, and candlestick maker the country through could, in fact, easily understand Thomas Paine's words, it only advances my argument – that we need teachers and politicians and ministers who are willing to forgo the call of popularity, to risk losing a few votes and missing a few new members, by daring their hearers to stretch a bit, to listen more carefully, to eschew the sound bite (did you like that one). That is, somehow we've got to retool, retrain, regroup, and call our nation from its lazy boy lifestyle to the task of life-long learning. Until we make a commitment as a nation to demand more than bumper sticker explanations, we will not solve the most difficult issues of our time – whether the misnamed War on

² -- and I opined in one of my emails that I seriously doubt she is right! Not being a historian, I cannot vouchsafe for my opinion beyond the level of opinion – but I think I am right to assume that our culture is even more educated, across the board, than was theirs, and though some of the difficulty we have in understanding Paine is the antiquated structure and vocabulary of eighteenth-century American English, the actual content of his text is still dense and difficult – too difficult to be easily understood by the commoner. There is no doubt that Paine's pamphlet made a strong impression on the common folk, and the colonies as a whole – but I believe this was so because of the way it was disseminated to the culture through the various "mouthpieces" of that day (i.e. newspapers, the local pub, and maybe even a preacher or two!)

Terror, the false dichotomies of “pro-life” / “pro-choice,” or the uneasy peace of our so-called racial reconciliation, which is always threatening to undo us.³

As I told Katie, I accept the liability of my particular use of language, but as long as I have a pulpit and a paycheck, I will refuse to dumb it down to a fill-in-the-blank sermon. As long as the church believes scripture is just a simple guide to moral living, we will reduce the Christian faith to a catechism of dos and don'ts that in the grand scheme of things are not unimportant. Faith is not whether you should smoke or drink or go with girls who do – it is about speaking truth to power, offering a corrective insight to the common wisdom of any day. It is about changing the equation, not reciting the formulas.

I want you to learn. I want you to understand. I want you to grow. I want faith to be applicable to your everyday life. I do! And there's enough ego in any pastor's resume to say that I want to be a part of that, personally – but I am not so arrogant as to assume that the 20 minutes a week you hear me speak from this pulpit will make or break your faith. I use different words in other teaching settings in my life with this church – and I trust that you are making some commitment on your own, if you really want to learn.

Faith, like everything else that is important in this world, cannot be conveyed unless someone is willing to speak the Whole Word, and unless we are willing to give ourselves to be its students.

I said earlier that every movement in human history has words to thank for its success, for as the writer Scott Momaday says it:

³ Having just written footnote #2, I do admit to my belief that the laziness of our nation has affected our ability, across the board, to listen and to think beyond the sound bite. In a sermon last year I quoted some words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and commented on the eloquence of his language – and the striking difference in his speech and the speech, and speeches, of today's politicians. Maybe we have lost an appreciation for, and a patience to listen to, such language, more than our ability to actually comprehend.

A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of the word can [humans] deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred.⁴

And I believe that every movement of progress, of liberation (of human beings and all of God's beautiful world), is a movement born in the heart of God, and is spoken from the mouth of God as a "living Word." At great moments in our history that Word is received into human hearts and reverses its course – for it is only when the heart of God through the Word of God, enters the human heart and takes flight in human speech that it can touch the earth. Bring healing. Bring wholeness. Bring peace.⁵

And here's the example. If you've not been listening, let me invite you back into the sermon. I want to say something that even the common folk out there can understand! *God is love* (1 John 4). Simple words, but a very big, abstract thought. Even our children can say it. But what does it mean? *Love is patient and kind... is not jealous or envious or arrogant or rude... Love does not seek its own way... love never dies.*

Another way to say it is... "I forgive you."

Not, God forgives you. (What does that mean?) Not, the pastor forgives you. (Who is he? And so what anyway?) Not, we are forgiven. (That's too general and lifeless.)

I. Forgive. You.

⁴ N.Scott Momaday, quoted in "The Living Pulpit," Oct-Dec 07, p.26.

⁵ The opening meditation in today's bulletin was from Frederick Buechner's *Wishful Thinking* ("Word," p.120): "In Hebrew the term *dabar* means both "word" and "deed." Thus to say something is to do something. *I love you. I hate you. I forgive you...* Who knows what such words do, but whatever it is, it can never be undone. Something that lay hidden in the heart is irrevocably released through speech into time, is given substance and tossed like a stone into the pool of history, where the concentric rings lap out endlessly."

Forgiveness is a word that needs to be spoken whole. It needs to be parsed, conjugated, defined, and carefully diagrammed. But the starting point is in the speaking of it. I forgive you.

Jesus had the audacity to say that you have that power. Not just to speak the words. But to actually forgive someone's sins. It's what he said. (I suppose you could argue that he only gave that power to the disciples who were literally sitting at his feet, but I take his words to be a command and challenge of joy to all disciples.) *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. And if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*⁶

Wow. I know of nothing more powerful than this – the power to hold the un-forgiveness of sins over the head of one who desperately needs to hear those words from us. Who needs to hear those words, spoken whole, from your lips today?

In his powerful book, *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal puts a dying Nazi soldier before a Jewish survivor of the holocaust, and has him ask for forgiveness. It is a wrenching story, and when the Nazi dies, unforgiven, it is clear he has died in torment. Perhaps eternal torment, for as Archbishop Desmond Tutu once stated, "Without memory, there can be no healing. Without forgiveness, there can be no future."⁷

One of our scriptural letters attributed to Peter reminds us of the power and responsibility of our use of language – the big words and the small: *when you speak, do so as if you are speaking the very words of God* (1 Peter 4). They are just words. But they are powerful beyond measure. And they have been given to us alone of God's creatures.

⁶ Obviously there is much more than could, and should be said, about Jesus' command here, regarding the power to forgive sins. This is a powerful, and perhaps troubling thought, but that is for another sermon! The point today is to emphasize the power and the importance of speaking that word, which becomes a living Word unto itself – perhaps it is the Word that forgives, and not the speaker (but someone must let the Word free so it can act its healing power!)

⁷ This is one of those "preacher quotes" that I picked up somewhere for which I have no proper citation.

Someone needs to hear today: The Word of God. Spoken, whole, through your lips. For their sake. For your sake. For the sake of little Garin Popour⁸ and all the children of the world. Don't resist the responsibility. And for God's sake – don't dumb it down.

Speak the whole word. And it will make the world whole.⁹

May it be so!

⁸ Garin's parents, Debra and Bill Popour, presented Garin today before the church for a service of parent/child dedication.

⁹ A closely related idea as I was formulating this sermon, was finding the "right word." I also used this quotation, from Mark Twain, in the bulletin: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it is the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning."